



Public Agenda surveys examine how well principals are managing their new roles as instructional leaders.

The Principal's

Jean Johnson

In the movie *Grease*, the principal of Rydell High School does what many people think principals do—she spends most of her time rounding up students who goof off, sorting out class schedules, and chaperoning school dances. No doubt, principals still do a lot of these things, but expectations have changed. Today, the principal's to-do list is different, and instructional leadership is right at the top of it.

At a minimum, most principals are expected to select, manage, motivate, and evaluate their team of teachers so their school meets its academic goals. Managing, motivating, and evaluating are typical managerial responsibilities in almost any field, but instructional leadership implies more than just finding good people and letting them do their thing. Instructional leaders are school principals who communicate an explicit and comprehensive vision of how children learn. They visit classrooms regularly, assess teaching strengths and weaknesses, and offer feedback and advice. They actively assist teachers in being more effective at helping students learn.

In some ways, the preferred vision of the principalship today seems more akin to being the director of an architect-

tural firm. A principal with vision and expertise creates a blueprint of how the school can achieve its goals. He or she then finds teachers and administrative staff to help make that vision a reality. The principal continually coaches and mentors the staff so that together they accomplish the desired results.

Several recent surveys conducted by Public Agenda confirm that the vast majority of districts are looking for precisely this kind of school leadership. According to Public Agenda's 2003 report, *Rolling Up Their Sleeves*, more than three-quarters of public school superintendents say that principals in their districts are being evaluated on their ability to judge and improve teacher quality.

Given the vibrancy of this vision and the emphasis districts are placing on it, how is instructional leadership really working out in schools? Are principals changing the way they do their jobs? What obstacles do they face in carrying out this facet of their work? Public Agenda surveys of public school principals and classroom teachers provide some insights.¹

How Do Most Principals View Instructional Leadership?

Surveys suggest that the vast majority see instructional leadership as a key mission. More than 9 in 10 public school principals (92 percent) say that "ensuring that all teachers use the

most effective instructional methods" is an essential part of being a school leader today.

Similarly high numbers say that "creating a teacher selection process that ensures the best teachers are recruited to the school" and "providing professional development opportunities to enhance the skills of new or struggling teachers" are also key components. As one elementary school principal told us, "It's the instructional leadership that makes a difference. The bottom line is we're there to improve instruction so the kids can learn."

Do Principals Believe They Can Increase Student Learning?

Research suggests that socioeconomic factors such as family income and level of education play a major

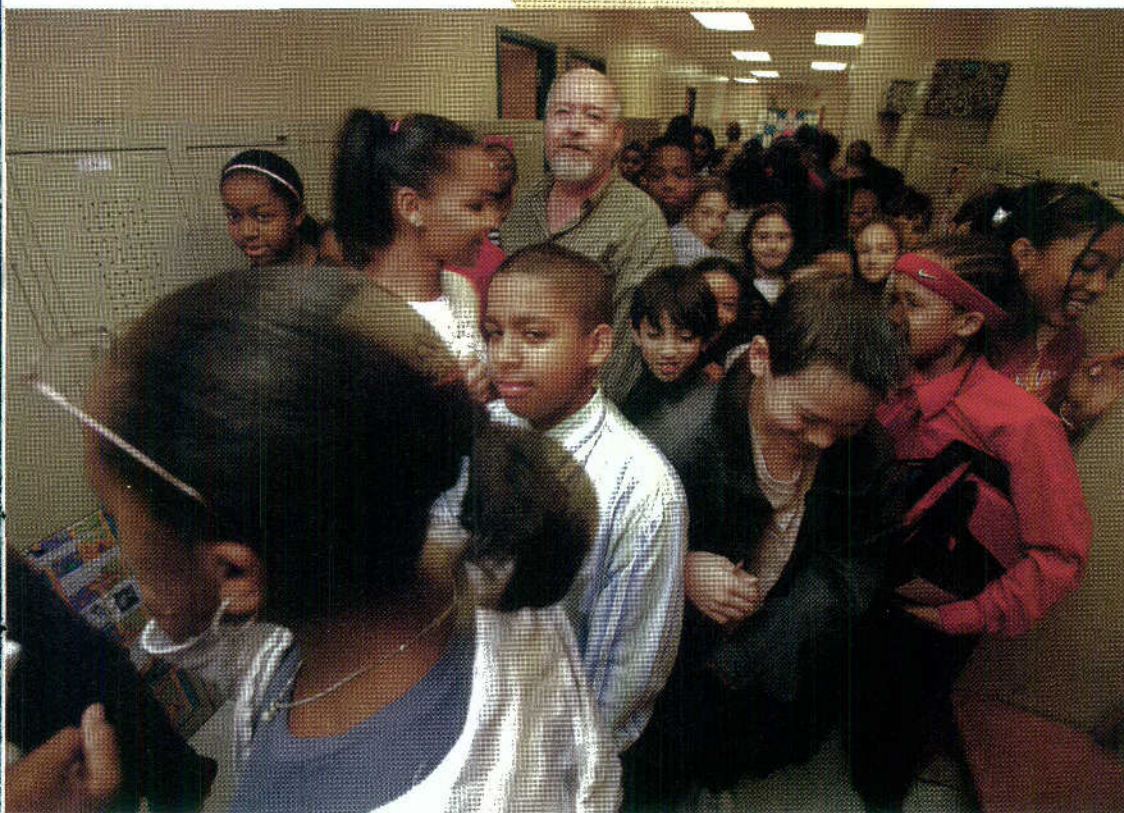
role in how well children do in school (Cook & Evans, 2000; Walker, Greenwood, Hart, & Carta, 1994). Despite this, many principals do seem to shoulder significant responsibility for student learning. In *Rolling Up Their Sleeves*, Public Agenda asked principals what they would think if large numbers of students in their district did poorly on a standardized test. About 1 in 10 (9 percent) said they would assume that the students just lacked ability; a few more (17 percent) would question the accuracy of the test itself. But about one-half (51 percent) said they would assume that the schools had failed to prepare the students adequately.

Of course, principals in different circumstances face different challenges, and their optimism about the potential effect they might have seems to vary, even when they are working in similar types of schools. Public Agenda recently completed a small-scale, but intriguing study for the Wallace Foundation titled *A Mission of the Heart: What Does It Take to Transform a School?* The study recounted the observations of principals in high-needs schools who participated in five focus groups in different areas of the United States. Although the principals had much in common, most fell into one of two distinct categories—they were either *transformers* or *copers*.

The transformers had "an explicit vision of what their school might be like and brought a 'can do' attitude to their job." Transformers typically accepted substantial responsibility for student learning. One described the essence of his job this way: "The question is, *How* can I have kids achieve—not *whether* kids [can] achieve."

In contrast, the copers were often "struggling to avoid being overwhelmed." They believed they didn't have the time or freedom to do much more than get through their day. Said one principal, "I find myself wearing so many hats. . . it's unbelievable. I just cannot free myself up." Transformers seemed to focus squarely on instructional leadership in their work, whereas copers often had a hard time building it into their stressful and sometimes chaotic work days.

Priority 1



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One coper told us that a typical day consists of “seven teachers grabbing me going down the hallway while I’m trying to get to an observation [that I’ve] got two minutes to get [to].”

Do Principals Believe They Work with Good Teachers?

The majority do. Sixty percent of principals say they are “very satisfied” with the quality of the teaching staff in their schools. Despite considerable hand-wringing in the press about the academic qualifications of young people entering teaching today, one-half of principals responding to these surveys say they believe the quality of new teachers has improved, whereas 31 percent say it has stayed the same.

Only 19 percent think the quality of new teachers is getting worse.

Unfortunately, the surveys also show that not all principals voice the same high levels of satisfaction with their teachers. According to Public Agenda’s *Reality Check 2006*, 65 percent of principals in mainly white schools said they were “very satisfied” with their teachers, but just 44 percent of principals in mainly minority schools said the same thing. It’s clear that instructional leadership should be an even higher priority for principals working in mainly minority, low-income settings.

An elementary principal in a high-needs school noted that principals of high-needs schools

must be very strong in curriculum. . . . Oftentimes, the teachers who are in high-needs schools have a small skill base [around] how to diagnose reading problems, struggling readers, and designing instruction for that.



Another high-needs principal said that picking a “knowledgeable and competent staff” was his top priority. “A lot of time, in high-needs schools, you . . . have less experienced teachers, which is difficult,” he said. “Those types of schools need the expertise of more experienced teachers.”

Where Do Principals Think Teachers Need to Improve?

Principals tend to zero in on a couple of key teacher shortcomings. Most principals are not that concerned about their teachers’ content knowledge, despite the attention the issue has gotten as a result of *No Child Left Behind*. Fewer than 10 percent of principals say that “quite a large number of teachers” need greater help in content knowledge. In contrast, discipline issues and techniques for helping struggling students seem to be major stumbling blocks.

More than one-third of principals (38

percent) say that “quite a large number” of new teachers need “a lot more training on effective ways to handle students who are discipline problems.” (This number rises to 46 percent among principals of high-needs schools.) More than one-half (53 percent) say that large numbers of new teachers need “a lot more training on effective ways to reach struggling students.”

Public Agenda’s teacher surveys show that teachers identify some of the same issues. According to results from *Rolling Up Their Sleeves* (2003) and *Stand by Me* (2003), most teachers and principals agree that formal teacher certification, although important, guarantees only a minimum of skills. Both groups think there’s plenty left

for teachers to learn once they actually have their own classrooms. Neither believes that poor content preparation is a common problem.

Conducted with the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality, Public Agenda’s recent study of first-year teachers—*Lessons Learned*—showed that most new secondary teachers are confident in their knowledge of their subject area and that most new elementary teachers are confident about their ability to teach reading and math. (The confidence level of new elementary teachers is somewhat lower for science.) Teachers are also concerned about how to help students whose skills and achievement lag. Although roughly 9 in 10 teachers are confident that most of their students will learn what they are supposed to learn by the end of the year, fewer than 7 in 10 say the same for their struggling students. In fact, only 14 percent of teachers are “very confi-

dent” that they “can turn around their hardest-to-reach students by the end of the year.”

Can Principals Provide the Help Teachers Need?

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2007), nearly all school principals have significant teaching experience. Ninety-five percent of elementary principals have at least three years of teaching experience, and two-thirds have 10 years or more. The numbers are nearly as high for secondary principals—94 percent have taught more than three years, and more than 6 in 10 have taught for more than a decade. Clearly, the vast majority of principals bring strong teaching experience to the table.

But in Public Agenda interviews, principals often talked about the challenge of helping others improve their teaching. One principal who was confident in his ability to teach pointed out the challenge of turning on “the eyes of observation” and reflecting on what was and wasn’t effective. Another described her learning curve on how to coach her teachers and help ramp up their effectiveness:

Every piece of feedback . . . has to be very specific: “This is what happened. This is the outcome.” [You have to understand] how to give feedback that moves the work. If you’re not moving the work, then you’re not doing what is necessary to move a school.

Given the importance that coaching and training teachers has assumed in schools today, it’s not clear that principals get the coaching and training *they* need to fulfill this key function. Principals noted that their own preparation for their jobs would have been much more useful had it focused more clearly on the challenges they actually face on the job—including the challenge of instructional leadership.

One principal complained about “the university classes I’ve had with professors [who] haven’t been at a school site in years. They’re really doing it from a textbook.” He noted, however, that “the classes I’ve taken from . . . active principals, [who] really bring some things to the table. . . give you food for thought on how to do things differently.” Our surveys confirm that this view is widespread. Two-thirds of principals (66 percent) agree

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that “typical leadership programs are out of touch with the realities” of schools today. Even more (78 percent) say that the requirements for certifying administrators should focus more on “practical, hands-on experience.”

Do Principals Have the Time?

According to our surveys of principals, 75 percent report that they spend more time “than they used to when it comes to working on the substance of teaching—for example, curriculum, teaching techniques, mentoring, and professional development.” Even so, most would like more hours to devote to this aspect of their work. Just 1 in 10 principals is satisfied with the time spent on this area; 70 percent of principals say they would like to do “a lot more” here; 19 percent would like to do a little more. In fact, fighting for time for

instructional leadership appears to be one of the main frustrations of being a principal today; nearly three-quarters of principals say that daily emergencies rob them of time “that could be better spent on academic or teaching issues.”

Making the time to invest in this important area was one of the distinguishing characteristics of the “transformer” principals working in high-needs schools. One transformer told us,

At the end of the day, with high-needs schools, it’s really about student achievement and the instruction. If we’re not able to be in the classrooms to observe instruction and make sure that our students are receiving high-quality instruction, then . . . moving the budget is not going to do anything.

Another talked about the need to make getting into the classroom the top priority:

I may have two or three teacher observations lined up to do. I just have to turn off my phone, close my door, and leave [because if I don’t] I’m going to be obstructed from doing them.

Copers, in contrast, often admitted that instructional leadership was the facet of their work that they often sacrificed to the distractions and emergencies of the day.

Good Prospects for the Future

The vast majority of principals seem to relish the idea of being an instructional leader. One especially promising sign is the degree to which principals and teachers share a common definition of where teachers need help. The overlap is quite notable. If principals were focused on one set of challenges and teachers were focused on something else, the prospects for working together constructively would be considerably less rosy.

Public Agenda has not looked closely at teachers’ views on instructional lead-

ership and the degree to which they are receptive to having principals coach and mentor them. Right now, teachers tend to look to principals for administrative support and help in handling discipline issues. New teachers, especially, look to colleagues rather than to principals for help with lesson plans and teaching techniques. Teachers' initial comfort level with principals as instructional leaders will likely depend on whether they see the principal as a coach and mentor or as a "boss" coming into the class to "judge them."

According to Public Agenda's research so far, the most serious hurdle facing instructional leadership is whether communities and districts are willing to reorganize schools so principals have time for this work. In the Public Agenda and Wallace Foundation study of the

transformers and copers, this question came up repeatedly. Some of the transformers had received district administrative support that enabled them to focus squarely on academic and teaching issues; these districts wanted their principals freed up to "transform" troubled schools. Other transformers in less supportive circumstances just decided that instructional leadership was job number one—and they relegated other tasks to second place. They engaged in a sort of education triage.

Principals in schools and districts of all kinds are frustrated by seeing time that could be spent on education eaten up by distractions that other administrative or clerical personnel could easily handle. Consequently, the crucial question for the field is whether interest in instructional leadership is accompanied

by a commitment to organizing schools in ways that make it possible.

In our interviews with principals, we often ask them to name one change that would help them do their best in their jobs. Here's a classic response: "Take [away] some of [my] responsibility . . . I mean, give me a break—how am I responsible for a bus driver being rude at a bus stop?"

That raises a good question for all of us: How do we really want principals to spend their time? **EL**

¹This article is based on five Public Agenda reports: *A Mission of the Heart: What Does It Take to Transform a School?* (2008); *Lessons Learned: New Teachers Talk About Their Jobs, Challenges, and Long-Range Plans* (2008); *Reality Check 2006: The Insiders: How Principals and Superintendents See Public Education Today* (2006); *Rolling Up Their Sleeves: Superintendents and Principals Talk About What Is Needed to Fix Public Schools*, (2003); and *Stand by Me: What Teachers Really Think About Unions, Merit Pay, and Other Professional Matters* (2003). The reports are available at www.publicagenda.org.

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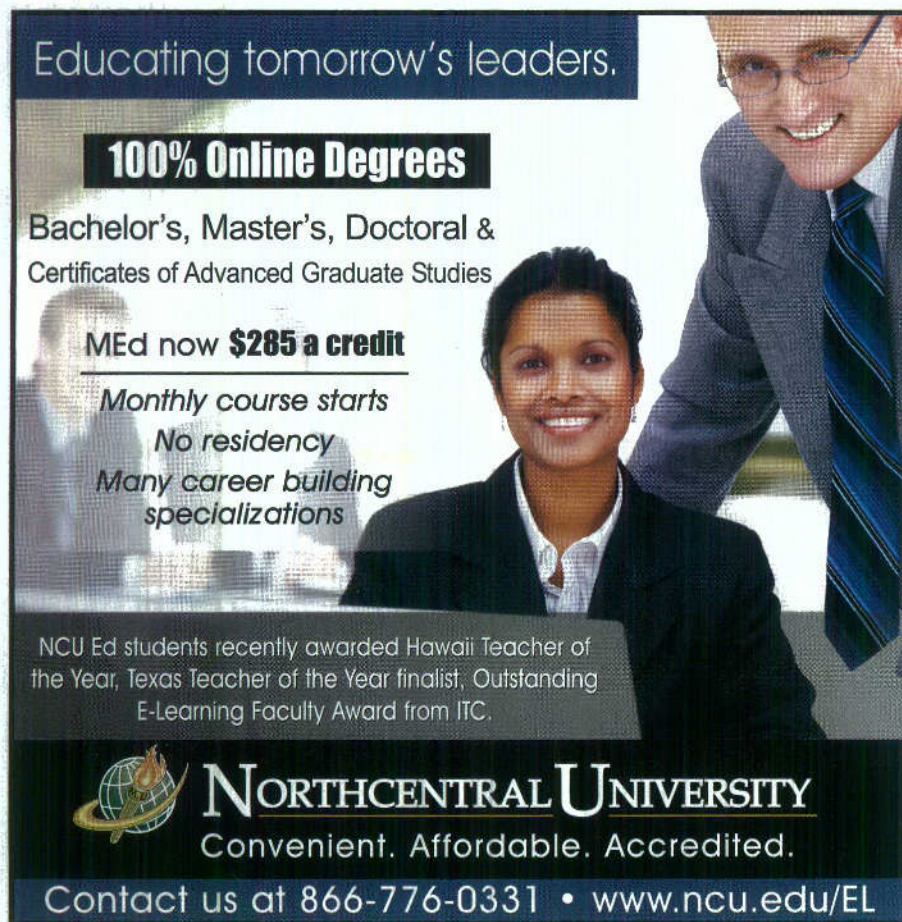
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